DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 333 301 CG 023 456

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TITLE Single-Parent Children and Middle Schools. Summary of Findings.
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Grade 7; Grade 8; Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; Junior High School Students; *Middle Schools; *One Parent Family; Parent Attitudes; *Parent School Relationship; *Student Needs

ABSTRACT

This study examined the needs of single-parent children in the seventh and eighth grades and the schools' response to those needs. Thirty principals, single parents, and experts were interviewed; their opinions suggested questions for a survey that was mailed to principals (N=391) and single parents (N=253). The findings indicated that principals and single parents agreed single-parent children have special needs that affect their performance at school. These special needs included: (1) the need for stability and structure; (2) the need to feel accepted by teachers and peers; (3) the need for parental involvement in academic and non-academic areas; and (4) the need for extra time with adults talking abouth their feelings as they adjust to being members of single-parent families. Specific school responses to special needs mentioned included better communication between parents and schools; counseling with counselors or social workers or talk with sympathetic teachers; supervised study and recreational time; and cooperation with agencies in provision of services to single-parent families. Specific approaches are needed for single-parent children which address the structure of single-parent families, the role of the school, and home-school communications. (Recommendations based on study findings are included.) (ABL)

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Summary of Findings: SINGLE-PARENT CHILDREN AND MIDDLE SCHOOLS*

by
Carolyn L. Wanat

This report summarizes the major findings of a larger study of needs of single-parent children in the seventh and eighth grades in the state of Wisconsin and of the schools' response to those needs.

The study was conducted through the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Wisconsin-Madison with the endorsement of the Association of Wisconsin School Administrators.

The report contains four major sections: (1) Study Questions, (2) Design and Methods, (3) Findings, and (4) Recommendations.

Study Questions

The potential needs of the increasing number of children in single-parent families suggested the following research questions:

1. What are the special needs of children from single-parent families in relation to schools as perceived by school administrators and single parents?

2. What existing school policies, programs, and practices effectively address the special needs of children from single-parent families as perceived by school administrators and single parents?

3. What specific school policies, programs, and practices need to be developed and implemented to further address the needs of children from single-parent families as perceived by school administrators and single parents?

4. What are the differences between perceptions of school administrators and single parents concerning the issues of special needs, existing policies, and proposed policies for children from single-parent families?

Design and Methods

We interviewed and surveyed principals and single parents of children in the seventh and eighth grades in the state of Wisconsin. Thirty principals, single parents, and experts on the

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**This report summarizes a study conducted by Carolyn L. Wanat, the major researcher. A detailed report is available by writing her at the Division of Planning, Policy, and Leadership Studies, N495 Lindquist Center, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52242.*

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subject gave their opinions in personal interviews. These opinions suggested questions for a survey that was mailed to a large sample of principals and single parents. All principals of the seventh and eighth grades and single parents of seventh and eighth grade students in twelve school districts received a copy of the survey. A total of 391 principals or 77% and a total of 253 single parents or 65% completed and returned the survey.

Findings

Special Needs

Principals and single parents agreed that single-parent children have special needs that affect their performance at school. Those special needs may be classified into four categories: (1) stability/structure, (2) acceptance, (3) parental involvement in education, and (4) adult attention.

Stability/Structure. Single-parent children need stability and structure in their lives. Principals felt the lowered socioeconomic status of single-parent families means a loss of stability and structure, while single parents felt that their lower socioeconomic status limits opportunities for their children to participate in school activities. Both groups agreed that continuing to live in the same home and attend the same school are important ways to provide stability. Consistently following established rules in the home at all times is the most effective way to provide structure.

Acceptance. Single-parent children need to feel accepted by teachers and peers. Principals generally felt that no stigmatism of these children exists, while single parents felt that single-parent children have been singled out at times.

Parental Involvement. Single-parent children need the involvement of their parents in both academic and non-academic areas. Helping with homework is sometimes difficult for single parents because they lack either the time or adequate academic skills. While single-parent children feel motivated to participate in extracurricular activities if their parents attend, scheduling of events sometimes makes attendance difficult.

Adult Attention. Single-parent children need to spend extra time with adults talking about their feelings as they adjust to being members of single-parent families. They also need positive role models. Principals were more concerned about providing role models through teachers and other staff members while parents simply wanted sympathetic adults to listen to their children.

School Response to Special Needs

Specific policies, programs, and practices have varying degrees of effectiveness in addressing the needs of single-parent children. Responses about their effectiveness follow.

Communication. Communication is the most important school practice to address special needs. Both groups felt that better communication is needed. Better communication would be prompt personalized two-way communication dealing with specific problems of individual children. Procedures so that parents can easily contact the school are an important component of communication.

Counseling. Counseling programs provide single-parent children with extra adult attention. Effective counseling programs focus on individual problems and concerns of children. Four types of programs effectively assist single-parent children: student assistance programs, student advisement, children's support groups, and informal adult role modeling. While principals felt that counseling with the guidance counselor and social worker were effective, parents felt that it was more important for children to have the opportunity to talk to a sympathetic teacher.

Supervised Activity. Single parents expressed a need for tutoring and supervised study time for children who are having difficulty with coursework and supervised recreational activities for all children. To a lesser degree, they also expressed a need for supervised before and after school care. Though principals felt that these programs were important, they did not attach as much importance to them as single parents.

Curriculum. Principals and single parents disagreed on the appropriate inclusion of family topics in the curriculum. Principals generally felt that family structure is included in the curriculum in a nonjudgmental manner. Parents felt that many lessons about family make the single-parent child feel different or uncomfortable.

Interagency Services. Principals generally felt that schools must cooperate with other agencies in providing services to single-parent families. They felt that the school may become involved in any family problem that affects a child's education. Parents felt that any family problems not directly related to their children's education were their responsibility and that the school should not necessarily become involved. However, parents felt that the school should notify them immediately of problems so that they could help their children.

Findings about Single-Parent Families

Three major findings emerged from this study that have a direct effect on the policies, programs, and practices identified

in the previous section. Specific approaches are needed for single-parent children, but no one program can be effective unless these findings are addressed: the structure of the single-parent family, the role of school, and home-school communications.

Structure of Family. Responses to the survey indicated that there are many forms of the single-parent family. These include one parent living with children, stepparent families, families in which two unmarried parents are living together and raising children from previous relationships together, and families in which previous spouses and current boyfriends or girlfriends assist with parenting without physically living with the child. Some parents living in these situations considered themselves to be single parents while others did not. Those parents who had the active assistance of another adult in parenting did not consider themselves to be single parents. Those parents who lacked this assistance considered themselves single parents whether or not another adult was present in their homes. These findings suggest that needs of single-parent families vary by individual situations and must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

Role of School and Family. Principals and single parents felt that school and family need clearly defined roles to address the needs of single-parent children. They disagreed, however, on the nature and extent of those roles.

A major area of disagreement centered on involvement in parenting. Principals felt that schools are being looked to by society and by single parents to serve as surrogate parents. Single parents, however, felt that the school should provide information to help them fulfill their parenting responsibilities.

Principals and single parents had clearly defined expectations of the school. Principals felt that schools should be involved in disciplining children, enforcing consistent rules, providing additional adult attention and role models, and teaching behaviors and responsibilities that previously have been taught at home. Single parents, however, felt that schools should not assume these responsibilities. Parents felt that schools should provide additional assistance in the school's primary role of educating children. For example, parents felt that schools should provide additional tutoring, help with homework, and supervised activities. To summarize, principals felt that schools are expected to fulfill the parenting role while single parents called upon schools to provide more extensive educational services.

Home-School Communications. Home-school communications link the school role and the parenting role. Principals and single parents agreed on the importance of maintaining communications between home and school. However, they disagreed on how communications should be maintained. While both groups agreed that effective communication provides contact procedures between home

and school, principals and single parents disagreed on who should initiate contact. Principals felt that it is the parents' responsibility to contact the school about changing family situations. Parents, however, felt that schools should make the initial contact, thereby establishing a communications network.

Principals and single parents also disagreed on what constitutes real communication between home and school. Though they recognized the need for informal contact, principals generally felt that formal methods of contact were more effective than single parents. For example, principals mentioned parent-teacher conferences and mailing information home as effective communications tools. Though single parents did not dispute the importance of formal communications, they felt that formal means were inadequate to attend to their children's needs. Parents felt that communication must be prompt individual personalized contact from the school to attend to problems as soon as the need arises. Parents added that the volume of printed materials sent home by the school does not address specific needs and also places unrealistic demands on their available time and attention.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, we make the following recommendations to help schools and single parents better address the needs of children:

Local Information. Local school district administrators must be aware of the family situations of their students and the potential special needs created by those situations. Information about community family structure should be collected and analyzed to help guide program development that is responsive to student need.

Communication. Two-way interactive communication between home and school is essential to serve the needs of all children. Since single-parent children potentially have special needs, communication between home and school should include procedures by which the parent can communicate need and the school can make the home aware of its role in responding to specific problems and in making parents aware of available assistance.

Home-School Role. The school and the home together must define their responsibilities in parenting children. They must determine areas of parenting in which single parents do not wish to receive the school's assistance and must discover those areas in which parents need additional help.

Stability/Structure. Local school districts must develop programs to provide single-parent children with the stability and structure that is often missing in their home situations. These programs should include educational and cultural opportunities as

well as additional adult attention. Appropriate activities include supervised study time and recreational activities.

Response to Problems. Through daily contact, teachers and building administrators are often aware of emotional difficulties experienced by single-parent children. Therefore, the school may appropriately assist the single-parent family by informing the parent of difficult situations, providing additional opportunities for the child to talk with adults, and referring the child or family to other social services agencies for severe problems.

Parent Involvement. Schools should involve single parents in their children's educational programs in ways that are realistic for the parents' available time and skills. While it may not be realistic to ask a single parent to spend time every evening helping a child with homework, it may be realistic to ask that parent to talk with a child about problems at school. Noncustodial parents should be involved whenever it is possible to do so.

Information Services for Parents. Schools could provide assistance to single parents through various information services. Schools should provide information about programs and assistance available through the school, other local not-for-profit and private agencies. Schools could also provide information and classes on parenting skills.

Staff Development. Staff development programs must educate teachers and other staff members about special needs that children may have as the result of family situations.

School-Local Business Interaction. Schools must collaborate with local employers to promote involvement of single parents in their children's education by arranging for schools to contact parents during work hours, parents occasionally to attend events during business hours, and children to receive supervised extended day care.

Summary

Perhaps the greatest finding of this study involves, not single-parent children, but all children. Regardless of family structure, home environment affects the child's readiness and attitude toward learning. Those attitudes are as varied as the families from which children come. Any set of findings or recommendations, therefore, may apply to all or no families in a given district. Local schools must look at family situations individually before making any assumptions about single-parent children, or any other children, thought to have special needs. A determination of need and specific programmatic responses can only be made on a local, case-by-case basis.

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